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H PLEASE PASS TO CODEL PAYNE

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL PAYNE JULY 8-9 VISIT TO FIJI

Summary

1. (SBU) Your visit comes at a time of great uncertainty in Fiji. In December of 2006, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) overthrew the elected government of Laisenia Qarase and dissolved parliament. The military commander, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, installed an interim government (IG) headed by himself. He argued that corrupt, racist politics forced the coup. Others saw more personal motives. The military and the IG have systematically attempted to quell dissent through coercion, intimidation and, at times, physical violence. The regime has compromised the independence of the judiciary, and has installed military officers into key areas of law enforcement and government. The economy has plunged into crisis. The regime has alienated significant portions of the population of Fiji and most of the international community. The United States believes strongly that a rapid return to democracy and a permanent rejection of "coup culture" are essential to Fiji's political and economic stability. The delegation can reinforce the message in meetings with former legislators and with representatives of the interim government. End Summary.

U.S. Interests in the Pacific

2. (SBU) The United States has significant interests in the Pacific. Hawaii and U.S. territories make the region part of our "homeland." Sea lanes to Asia and Australia need protecting. Terrorists could see the islands as stepping-stones to the U.S. Fiji and Tonga contribute to international peacekeeping. Small Pacific states have 12 votes in the UNGA and are well-represented in other international fora. The U.S. fishes the waters for tuna and wants to preserve reefs and bio-diversity. We need to provide services to hundreds of thousands of American visitors and adjudicate visas for thousands of islanders annually. Very visibly with Fiji and Tonga, we aspire to promote U.S. values and encourage democratic institutions.

The 2006 Coup

3. (SBU) Since 1987, Fiji has been afflicted with a "coup culture," wherein disaffected groups or individuals believe it is legitimate to overrule the wishes of the majority via the power of arms. The 2006 coup, Fiji's fourth, followed several years of poor relations between Commodore Bainimarama and Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. Qarase's government was seen by many as too ethnic Fijian in orientation. (As a British-colonial legacy, Fiji has a large ethnic-Indian minority. Racial politics colors all politics.) Fiji's military bitterly criticized Qarase for three bills, most prominently one that might have allowed amnesty to some of the Fijian-nationalist perpetrators of the 2000 coup. Qarase was also accused of condoning corruption. Another coup motive was the military's need to gain immunity from prosecution on charges of murder in 2000 and sedition thereafter. Qarase's SDL party won a modest majority in the May 2006 general election, defeating Mahendra Chaudhry's Indian-dominated Fiji Labor Party (FLP), despite an

intense military campaign in ethnic-Fijian villages against Qarase.

14. (SBU) After the election, Qarase immediately reached out to the FLP, giving nine Labor politicians choice slots in a multi-party cabinet. Qarase also shelved the controversial amnesty bill. This "honeymoon period," while warmly welcomed by most of Fiji's population, lasted only four months. The military resumed making demands and on December 5, 2006, executed its coup, despite repeated entreaties from the United States, Australia and New Zealand that it should stay out of politics.

The Coup's Aftermath

15. (SBU) Bainimarama established an "interim government" with himself as acting President. After a month, he made himself interim Prime Minister and appointed an interim cabinet. Members include FLP leader Chaudhry (who was the Prime Minister deposed in the 2000 coup) and a mixture of former military officials, FLP officials and representatives of small parties that had been badly defeated in the 2006 national elections. Bainimarama insists his interim government will rid Fiji of corruption and racial politics, leading to a bright, clean, democratic future. The interim regime has decreed immunity for the military from prosecution for the coup and associated human-rights violations.

16. (SBU) While the coup itself was bloodless, the military has used strong-armed tactics to quell dissent. Many persons who voiced opposition to the regime were taken to the military camp for intense interrogations, and sometimes physical beatings. Two young Fijian men have been killed in military custody since the coup, and one man was killed while under police custody. Prosecution efforts in those cases have been snail-like. Under considerable international pressure, the military and interim government ended the formal

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"state of emergency" imposed after the coup on June 1. The police force retains a law enforcement role, but serious questions remain about the rule of law in Fiji. Military personnel are now co-located at all local police stations, and a high-ranking military officer has been named Police Commissioner. Fiji's judiciary also appears to have been compromised. The military suspended the Chief Justice and replaced him with a judge allegedly sympathetic to the coup.

The U.S. and International Role in Restoring Democracy

17. (SBU) The United States suspended all FMF and IMET military assistance to Fiji after the coup, as required by law, imposed other military sanctions, and invoked visa restrictions on coup leaders and members of the interim government. The visa restrictions by Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have especially frustrated the regime. Perhaps in pique over such sanctions, the interim government recently expelled the New Zealand High Commissioner (equivalent to Ambassador) from Fiji. The regime gave no specific reasons except to note that New Zealand has vigorously opposed the coup and the High Commissioner was "in our face."

18. (SBU) Under international pressure, the interim regime has agreed "in principle" to a plan put forward by the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) for elections by early 2009, contingent on electoral assistance from the international community. (The PIF is a regional body with membership consisting of 16 Pacific countries, including Australia and New Zealand). The United States supports the PIF plan, which actually foresees elections in November 2008, assuming donor support. The U.S. is considering democracy-promotion assistance via NGOs, but details are still being developed in conjunction with other donors. Australia, New Zealand, and the EU have publicly stated they will assist preparations for early elections, contingent upon concrete actions by the interim government to move the process rapidly forward.

Fiji's Role in Peacekeeping

19. (SBU) The RFMF has long been a respected member of international peacekeeping missions, especially in the Middle East

where Fiji served for 20 years with the UN in Lebanon, has a 25-year history with the Multi-national Force of Observers Sinai (320 troops/year) and has 240 troops with the United Nations Assistance Mission Iraq (UNAMI). Fiji has expressed interest in joining the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq (MNFI). Because of the coup, the United States has announced it will not support Fiji's participation in new peacekeeping operations, including in MNFI, until there is substantial movement toward a rapid return to democracy.

Your Meetings with Former Legislators and Interim Government
Representatives

¶10. (SBU) We are arranging a dinner for members of the delegation with deposed parliamentarians in the Nadi area. We have invited the interim government to send a representative or representatives for a separate meeting with the delegation. Your meetings will provide opportunity to stress the U.S. commitment from both the executive and legislative branches to the rule of law and the protection of human rights in Fiji, along with our support for a rapid return to democracy consistent with the timeline proposed by the Pacific Islands Forum.

The Other Countries Covered by Embassy Suva - Tonga, Kiribati,
Tuvalu, and Nauru

¶11. (U) In addition to Fiji, Embassy Suva formally represents the United States in four other countries: Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru. We provide consular services for Americans in French Polynesia, and the Embassy Defense Attache Office has responsibilities for Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as well. Embassy Suva's new "environmental hub" office covers the entire Pacific region. A new public-diplomacy office with similarly regional responsibilities is set to open this summer. Local security issues and Embassy Suva's expanding responsibilities have necessitated construction of a new embassy compound that has a completion date of early 2009.

¶12. (SBU) Tonga is a Kingdom of 100,000 people. At least as many Tongans live abroad, including in portions of the United States. Tonga has been moving gradually toward a more representative government. Partly due to frustration over the pace of reform, a pro-democracy demonstration in November exploded into violence, resulting in a devastating riot that left eight people dead and much of the capital's central business district destroyed. The riot appears to have further slowed the pace of reform, although the King and the Prime Minister insist reform will continue. The Tonga Defense Service (TDS) is involved in several peacekeeping missions

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throughout the world. The TDS is scheduled to undertake a second deployment to Iraq as part of the MNFI later this year.

¶13. (SBU) Nauru, Tuvalu and Kiribati are microstates. Nauru and Tuvalu have populations of around 10,000. Kiribati has 90,000 citizens scattered across much of the central Pacific. All are functioning democracies. A national election took place in Tuvalu in 2006. Elections in Nauru and Kiribati will take place in 2007. All three have serious economic difficulties and depend largely on international assistance. Nauru, Tuvalu and Kiribati all recognize Taiwan. Fiji and Tonga recognize the PRC. The PRC-Taiwan rivalry is an important issue throughout the Pacific, with clear good-governance implications.

Dinger